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ABSTRACT

In the mid 1980's some of the counselors on Guam began to explore oppressive family patterns. This resulted in major legislative, child welfare, and law enforcement changes, as well as a quest for treatment strategies that would meet the needs of this unique multi-cultural population. This paper discusses the use of experiential, culture-sensitive techniques to help women experiencing partner abuse. Themes are used as treatment strategies for education and recovery group counseling of abused women and include personal safety, victim blaming, growing up females, and denial. (JDM)

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Empowering abused women: multi-cultural counseling techniques

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Ann is a Senior Individual, Marriage and Family Therapist with the Superior Court of Guam, Client Services and Family Counseling Division. Ann has been conducting groups for women in violent relationships since 1985. She presently co-leads the only education and recovery group which exists for any abused woman on the island. She is a member of the Governor's Task Force on Family Violence and she authored two chapters in the book titled "Family Violence on Guam." She has helped teach a course with the same name at the University of Guam. Also, she has conducted training workshops throughout Guam and on Saipan.

Kelly has been the co-leader of the T.H.R.I.V.E. (Teaching, Healing and Redirecting women In Violent Environments) group with Ann since its inception in 1995. Kelly initially helped with the group as a practicum student. She is highly committed to this population. Kelly completed her Master's degree in May of 1998 and is presently employed with the Department of Education on Guam as a high school counselor. Previously, she worked at the Victim Witness Ayuda Services with the Attorney General's Office.

Ann and Kelly have learned that cognitive teaching methods are ineffective in this highly diverse cultural setting. Many group participants know English on a limited basis and their thought processes are not western. This paper contains some of the many techniques used to empower women. Most techniques are experiential.

INTRODUCTION

The island of Guam is composed of many cultures. The largest populations include Chamorro, Filipino, Chuukese, and Palauan. Within each of these cultures is a set of beliefs and practices regarding male and female roles. Historically, most of these cultures have dealt with problems such as partner abuse within their extended family system.

In the mid 1980's some of the counselors on Guam began to explore **oppressive family patterns.** This resulted in major legislative, child welfare, and law enforcement changes. This also resulted in a quest for treatment strategies which would meet the needs of this unique multi-cultural population.

Over the past thirteen years, the primary author has treated almost 1,000 survivors of partner abuse. She has found that through the use of experiential, culture -- sensitive techniques, women who seek to break free from the chains of oppressive practices can be empowered. She and Kelly are eager to present some of the techniques they have found useful.

THEMES

Each week we choose a theme and help the participants explore that theme. Examples of the themes include SAFETY, POWER AND CONTROL, OPPRESSION, VICTIM BLAMING, WOMEN'S ANGER, GROWING UP FEMALE, THE EFFECTS OF ABUSE ON VICTIMS, HOW DOES OUR CULTURE CONTRIBUTE TO ABUSE, AND THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN. Throughout the

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remainder of this paper, we will dis-cuss how some of these themes are developed and presented in an experiential style. Actual techniques will be explained and demonstrated at the conference.

It is important to begin this process by placing yourself in the role of a victim who is trying to make sense out of what she is experiencing. It is especially important that we each understand what it might be like to be unable to fully comprehend what is being taught due to language and cultural barriers. For this reason, we ask each of you to take a visualization trip with us.

Please close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths and allow yourself to relax. Imagine you are on a flight to Australia. Due to mechanical problems, your flight is forced to land on a remote island where no one speaks English or whatever language is your primary language. When you awaken the next morning you discover that the flight crew has disappeared and you are the only passenger remaining. You use your nonverbal communication skills to obtain some of your needs and you find food and shelter. You are frightened by all of the animals, snakes and insects that inhabit the island. You fear you may never see the people you love again.

As time passes, some of the people laugh at you because you look and talk differently. Sometimes they hit you and throw things at you because they believe you are inferior to them. Your body is bruised, you have been humiliated repeatedly and you live in constant fear.

One day, a cruise ship comes to the island. You anticipate being rescued. You swim to the ship and beg to be taken on board. The people on the ship look similar to you but they speak a language different from your language.. You are dressed in rags with no shoes, your body is bruised and you are trying desperately to get someone to understand your situation. You go to the ship's officers, people who look kind, and even to people who look mean. Finally you find one passenger who speaks a little English. You tell him about your situation. He looks at you with disgust and tells you everything that has occurred is your fault.

It is important that you remember that prior to your present dilemma you were a professional counselor with skills and intellect. You were accustomed to being treated with respect. Before you open your eyes, spend a few moments thinking about what you would do if you were in this situation. When you open your eyes, begin to write what you experienced and what you might do.

The exercise we completed is meant to help each of us understand what it is like to be in a situation where everything is different and difficult. A victim of violence in a cultural setting that is unfamiliar may have similar experiences.

We have found that the female role in partner abuse varies considerably within the island communities. In some island cultures, women have been taught to be violent. In some island cultures, women have power in many situations. Lastly, In some island cultures, oppression is covert and subtle.

A primary theme for each group is **PERSONAL SAFETY.** We help the women explore various things they can do to keep themselves safe in their present situation and plan for safety in other situations. The activity which compliments this theme is titled **"MY SHIELD."** Each participant takes time to identify the strengths and coping skills she possesses which have kept her alive and protected. We show the women examples of shields made by other women. They soon realize that their shield does not have to be an elaborate piece of art. There is no right or wrong way to create a shield and the women encourage each other as the shields are discussed in the group. The questionnaire and samples will be provided at the conference.

Another theme which is often presented is **WHAT IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: WHAT ARE THE REALITIES AND MYTHS OF PARTNER ABUSE?** Various methods of verbal expression are utilized. We have used a poem titled **"NINE DAYS OF ROSES"** to help the women understand their reality.

NINE DAYS OF ROSES

I REMEMBER . . .

THE FIRST TIME YOU SAID YOU WERE SORRY AND YOU NEVER WANTED TO HURT ME.
A SINGLE ROSE YOU GAVE ME.

THE FIRST TIME YOU PUSHED ME DOWN AND SLAPPED MY FACE.
A SINGLE ROSE YOU GAVE ME.

THE FIRST TIME YOU KICKED ME IN THE STOMACH WHEN I WAS PREGNANT WITH OUR FIRST CHILD.
A SINGLE ROSE YOU GAVE ME.

THE FIRST TIME YOU CHOKED ME AND THREATENED TO KILL ME AND THE CHILDREN IF WE EVER LEFT.
A SINGLE ROSE YOU GAVE ME.

THE FIRST TIME YOU THREW ME ON THE BED AND FORCED ME TO HAVE SEX WITH YOU.
A SINGLE ROSE YOU GAVE ME.

THE FIRST TIME I CALLED THE POLICE. YOU BLAMED ME AND SAID IT WAS ALL MY FAULT.
A SINGLE ROSE YOU GAVE ME.

THE FIRST TIME I CAME HOME LATE FROM WORK. YOU ACCUSED ME OF SLEEPING WITH MY BOSS. YOU FORCED ME TO QUIT MY JOB.
A SINGLE ROSE YOU GAVE ME.

THE FIRST TIME YOU LOCKED ME IN THE ROOM AND BEAT ME SO I COULDN'T WALK OUT OF OUR RELATIONSHIP.
A SINGLE ROSE YOU GAVE ME.

THE FIRST TIME YOU HELD A GUN TO MY HEAD AND TOLD ME YOU WOULD NEVER LIVE WITHOUT ME.
A SINGLE ROSE YOU GAVE ME.

THE FIRST TIME I RECEIVED SO MANY FLOWERS - **TODAY!** AFTER NINE DAYS OF ROSARIES AND MORE THAN NINE EVENTS WHICH RESULTED IN A SINGLE ROSE, I AM DEAD. YOU KEPT YOUR PROMISE.

By KELLY RENAE SUKOLA, HAGÅTÑA, GUAM, 1998

Last year one of our professional colleagues (a former classmate of Kelly) was murdered by her ex-husband. He had threatened that he would kill their daughter in front of her. She had legally divorced him. He came to the house, killed the daughter in the way he threatened, killed her, and then killed himself.

The entire island was in shock. This was a very prominent family. The victim's brother was the priest at their funeral. This reality continues to haunt us.

Another theme is **DENIAL: I'M STILL ALIVE, SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM.** To help each woman explore this theme, we use various exercises and writings which illustrate that when anyone is caught up in a violent relationship, they "can't see the jungle for the trees." Storytelling, a very popular way to pass on ideas, helps accomplish this task.

THE LEGEND OF THE FRAGRANT PLUMERIA TREE

[DEDICATED TO TAN MARIA TORRES]

There was a young Chamorrita who lived in the village of Yigo. She had long, thick hair and delicate skin. She loved to swim in the ocean and walk in the jungle. One thing she especially liked was the delicate fragrance of Plumeria flowers. In the jungle where she walked was a little Plumeria tree that seemed more fragrant than any she had ever encountered. She would sit beside this tree whenever she wrote poetry, stories, or songs. Her heart was happy as she used her creative mind.

One day her grandmother warned her that a big typhoon was expected to hit the island. She immediately thought about the little Plumeria tree. She feared that the typhoon might blow the tree away. She ran into the jungle, cut a strong branch of the tree, and headed toward home to preserve it in a tin of water in case the rest of the tree was destroyed by the storm.

On the way home, the wind became so strong she was unable to stand. As she crawled along, the wind suddenly blew the branch out of her hand. She chased the branch until she caught it again. She realized that she could lose her own life if she continued to crawl along with the awkward branch. She stopped for a few moments, dug a hole in the jungle floor, and buried the branch for safe keeping.

After the storm had passed, she ran back into the jungle to see if the little Plu-meria tree had survived. It had blown away as had most of the smaller trees. She then ran to the place where she thougnt she had buried the tree branch. She dug but could not find it. Every thing looked so different. The typhoon had destroyed so many things.

The Chamorrita grew older. She continued to go into the jungle as often as she could. Each time she would dig in places that seemed familiar. She hoped that some day she would find a remnant of the branch. Even though she had married and now had child-ren of her own, she often had dreams about the night of the typhoon. She remembered some of what occurred but she could not remember where the branch was buried. She longed for that wonderful fragrance. She enjoyed the aroma of Plumeria trees everywhere on the island but none compared with the tree she had known long ago.

As the years passed, she was haunted by the loss of that tree branch. One day she was looking for some roots to create a special medicine for her grandchild who had been very ill. As she dug for a root, a beam of light suddenly hit the spot where she was digging. She looked down and discovered a very special locket she had been wearing the night of that strong typhoon. As she made this discovery, she realized that she was digging near a very big Plumeria tree. She took a deep breath and drank in the familiar fragrance she had kept in her memory. The branch she buried long ago had grown into the beautiful Plumeria tree which stood before her.

She began to laugh. In her desperation to find the branch, she had never stopped to consider the possibility that a tree could have grown as a result. She picked up her locket, tarnished with age, and gathered the roots for her grandchild. She picked a Plumeria flower for her hair and walked home to prepare the medicine for her grandchild. She walked a little faster than usual. She was in a hurry to tell everyone.

BY ANN HARDIN, HAGÅTÑA, GUAM, 1997

An extremely important topic to explore is **VICTIM BLAMING.** When we address this often experienced phenomenon, we use a dramatization titled, **"Don't Blame Her."** We hope to be able to present this very powerful visual experience at the conference.

Another theme which is popular is **WHY SHE STAYS?** To explore this victim-blaming issue, we use a metaphor titled, **"The Sand Castle Builder and the Dragon."**

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THE SAND CASTLE BUILDER AND THE DRAGON

Imagine a young woman skipping down the beach carefree, happy, and full of life. She happens upon a young man building a castle in the sand. She is intrigued by the detail he has included in his castle. She stops to admire his creative talents. They discuss his design.

Each day she stops to talk with him as she skips along the beach. She enjoys this very handsome and interesting young man. They talk about things, they laugh, and they begin to form a special friendship.

After some time, as she skipped down the beach one day she noticed that her friend was not in his usual place building a castle. As she approached the area, a FIREBREATHING DRAGON suddenly charged out of the jungle and headed straight for her. She ran down the beach. She managed to escape.

Every day after that she cautiously walked down the beach hoping to find her friend once again. Most days he was there. They talked and she was happy to be with him. She did not tell him about the dragon. Some days, when she least expected it, the dragon charged at her from the jungle and she ran for her life.

The girl began to avoid going to the beach. She wanted to be with her friend but she became so fearful of the dragon that she didn't know what to do.

As time went by, the dragon was waiting for her more often than her friend. One day the dragon caught up with her and burned her. Her friends and family came to see her at the hospital. They each told her not to go to that beach anymore. She knew they were right but she missed her friend. When the burns healed she went to the beach.

After some time, she began to realize that she no longer enjoyed the visits with her friend. She longed for the way their time together used to be. Finally, she went to the beach one last time to tell her friend that she would not be coming to see him anymore. When she reached their place at the beach, the dragon charged at her and burned her so severely she never walked, skipped, or ran along the beach again.

ANN HARDIN, HAGÅTÑA, GUAM, 1996

Another theme often used in the group is **GROWING UP FEMALE.** We explore similarities in how each woman was treated as a child and we discuss differences in terms of male/female practices and cultural practices. One of the exercises we use to help each woman explore her childhood is a COLLAGE which is titled, **"My Childhood."** For many women this is the first time they realize that how they were raised had a significant impact on their present situation. Another way the topic of GROWING UP FEMALE is explored is accomplished using a very simplified version of a **genogram. We call it "My Family Tree."** We explain that we are not just going to put all of the names on the family tree but we will also indicate who had substance abuse issues, who was abused, which pairs separated or divorced, who committed suicide, etc. This helps each participant visualize family patterns which may need to

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be changed.

Another theme is **MY RIGHTS.** This is a very powerful exercise in which each woman is given an opportunity to identify the basic rights she wants to claim in her life. We have seen an incredible change occur in most of the women once they realize they have rights. Sometimes these lists are created on large sheets of paper. The group members then add their list to a group list. This activity seems to help empower the women. Along with listing rights, the women sometimes create a collage which is titled, **"What FREEDOM Means to Me."** Cultural differences are highlighted extensively using this exercise.

Another theme is **SELF ESTEEM.** We use several activities to help partici-pants explore their self-esteem. A difficult but powerful exercise is the **"Boasting Exercise."** Another very powerful exercise is the **"Positive Stroke Exercise."** We also explore ways to increase self-esteem on a very slow but steady path.

The last theme we will mention is **AFFIRMATIONS.** Although this is something we hear frequently in western culture, it is not talked about very often in Asian-pacific cultures. We provide basic information regarding affirmations and a list of some affirmations to practice. Each woman selects one affirma-tion to practice three times each day during the next week. The following week, each participant tells the group what this was like for them.